

VIII. Celebrating Adoption Finalizations

A. Programs

- Adoption Saturdays
- Dedication of a Court Calendar to Adoptions
- Commemorative Item for Adopted Child or Whole Family

Adoption Saturdays

What are they?

Adoption Saturdays are a collaborative effort by attorneys, judges, and court staff to give children a permanent home while clearing up backlogs in the adoption process. Pending adoptions are finalized on a Saturday, with judges, clerks, attorneys, and volunteers on hand to work only on these finalizations.

Why do this?

Adoption Saturdays have proven to be an effective tool for helping families sort through the large amount of paperwork that must be filed to complete an adoption. It also lightens the juvenile court's heavy caseload. Los Angeles County has held 23 Adoption Saturdays since 1998. On these days, more than 7,000 adoptions have been finalized.

What goal does this program address?

In Los Angeles County, Alameda County, and other counties throughout the state, an Adoption Saturday program was implemented to expedite the adoption and permanency process and to clear a backlog. Some counties have no backlog but still hold Adoption Saturday as part of a day-long celebration.

How can you start this program in your county?

Los Angeles County will hold its 24th Adoption Saturday on November 18, 2006. The event that originated in Los Angeles has spread throughout the United States. As recently as 2005, 45 states and the District of Columbia participated in an Adoption Saturday program, completing the adoptions of 3,400 children. The number continues to grow every year as many other cities throughout California and nationwide join Los Angeles in holding Adoption Saturdays on the same day. While not overwhelming, the preparation does include a goodly amount of front-end work. Los Angeles has made this process much smoother by involving local nonprofits, law firms, and attorneys in the project. Los Angeles works closely with the Alliance for Children's Rights, a nonprofit organization that is helping to coordinate Adoption Saturdays around the state and the country.

Ideally, many attorneys and judges will be eager to volunteer. Alameda County will hold its 7th annual Adoption Saturday this year, when many judges volunteer to finalize adoptions and participants can enjoy many other fun activities planned for them throughout the day. In 2005, as many as 20 judges volunteered their time on Adoption Saturday, as did hundreds of others from

social services and other agencies and other helpful volunteers (a schedule of events from last year follows). These events and others continue to garner great participation.

For bailiffs and clerks who are not volunteering, paying overtime is possible, since this event incorporates direct court work. Additionally, assistance may be requested from Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), who can be very helpful in waiting rooms.

Though the event listed here is called Adoption Saturday, some courts choose to hold the event during the week on a specific day to allow the event to take place during normal work hours. For example, San Bernardino Superior Court, Juvenile District and the Department of Social Services will hold its 9th annual Adoption Celebration event where they anticipate finalizing the adoption of 75 children. The event is held at a local convention center due to the large size of the event and the number of participants. In addition to the finalization hearings, festivities are held for the children and families participating. Other counties such as San Diego and Ventura also celebrate events on days other than Saturday.

For suggestions on how to coordinate these ideas with the media, see section III, Court Outreach to the Media.

Contacts:

Alameda County: Fredi Juni, Management Analyst, Alameda County Social Services Agency, County of Alameda, 510-268-2422

Los Angeles County: Hon. Michael Nash, Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court, Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles, 323-536-6377

San Bernardino County: Kim Greve, Court District Manager, Superior Court of California, County of San Bernardino, 909-387-7005

San Diego County: Jamie Rivas, Adoption Support Services Supervisor, San Diego County Adoptions, 858-694-5345

Tulare County: Michelle Hineman, Court Manager, Superior Court of California, County of Tulare, 559-733-6374, ext. 191

Ventura County: Patti Morua-Widdows, Court Manager, Superior Court of California, County of Ventura, 805-981-5938

Statewide: Laura Streimer, Legal Director, Alliance for Children's Rights, 213-368-6010

Dedication of a Court Calendar to Adoption

What is it?

This program is an action by the court to make pending adoptions a priority, usually by setting aside specific time.

Why do this?

Dedicating a certain amount of the court's time exclusively to adoptions ensures that a child will not wait for an adoption while the system catches up with a backlog.

What goal does this program address?

Dedication of the court calendar gives the court an exclusive opportunity to finalize adoption proceedings. This should help eliminate any backlog, because cases do not accumulate as quickly. Ultimately, a court that dedicates its calendar is making a statement that children are a priority and finalization is important.

How can you start this program in your county?

There are many ways of making adoptions a priority on a court calendar. El Dorado County, for example, has previously dedicated the last Friday of each month to adoption proceedings. By dedicating a specific amount of time to adoptions, the court was able to make these proceedings a special event. The commissioner made animal balloons for the children, each child received a certificate of adoption, a local apple grower donated goody bags, and court personnel made treats such as brownies and cookies. When the families agreed to it, the local newspaper even covered the proceedings. In Contra Costa County, adoption matters were heard daily before any other matter was heard. At the 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. calendars, the judge asked if there were any adoptions pending. If there were, they were heard first, and if not, the judge moved on to other matters.

Contacts:

Contra Costa County: Superior Court of California, County of Contra Costa, 925-646-2960

El Dorado County: Rosalie Tucker, Court Manager, Superior Court of California, County of El Dorado, 530-621-6718

San Luis Obispo County: Superior Court of California, County of San Luis Obispo, 805-781-5420

Commemorative Item for Adopted Child or Whole Family

What is it?

In another simple program, the courts award new adoptive families, primarily the children, with a commemorative item, such as a teddy bear or other small gift. It helps acknowledge the significance of the event.

Why do this?

This is yet another innovative program in which counties attempting to improve the adoption process have shown that even the smallest of efforts recognizes the joys and uniqueness of becoming a family through adoption. Courts should join in with the family to commemorate and celebrate their commitments to one another.

What goal does this program address?

Often it seems that children in and out of the system feel that the adoption process is working against them. The children need to feel more comfortable with the process. They need to feel that the process is rewarding them rather than taking something from them. Furthermore, this program helps build the self-esteem of the newly adopted child as that child begins a new life as a member of a family. The use of teddy bears has also been used when permanency has been established with a caring relative or other adult, or when permanency has been reestablished with a parent or parents.

How can you start this in your county?

Many counties are currently handing out a small gift to each newly adopted child. Some courts give out teddy bears or other stuffed animals, stickers, candy, or other items to the adopted children and their new siblings. In Ventura County, these gifts help celebrate and acknowledge the day's significance and further memorialize the family's commitment to one another. Nevada County celebrates after each adoption through its Teddy Bear Program, where court clerks and other personnel donate teddy bears, which are then given to newly adopted children. Toys may also be donated by local businesses or larger foundations or charities. San Bernardino County also gives away teddy bears donated by the San Bernardino County Children's Fund, both at their annual adoption celebration event and throughout the year.

Another commemorative item that Nevada County offers to adoptive families is the child's handprint created in a tile on the day the adoption is finalized. The tiles are displayed in the courthouse for a period of time, and then rotated as new adoptions (and new tiles) are finalized. Once a child's tile has been displayed for a certain period of time, the family is then offered the

tile. The tiles offer an attractive display for the courthouse walls, as well as publicity for the need for more adoptive parents.

Contacts:

Nevada County: Jennifer McCalligan, Judicial Secretary, Family Law Department, Superior Court of California, County of Nevada, 530-265-1476

San Bernardino County: Kim Greve, Court District Manager, Juvenile Dependency Court, Superior Court of California, County of San Bernardino

Ventura County: Patti Morua-Widdows, Court Manager, Superior Court of California, County of Ventura, 805-981-5938

B. Resources

- Adoption Saturdays:
 - History of Adoption Day in Los Angeles
 - Photograph From Los Angeles' 1999 Adoption Saturday With Chief Justice Ronald M. George and Adopted Children
 - Connect for Kids: Great Idea, Great Results
 - Home at Last: 22 Children's Permanent Placement With Families is Cemented at Adoption Ceremony
 - Bay Area's 6th Annual Adoption Day!

History of Adoption Saturday in Los Angeles

Saturday, April 25, 1998, was a day of celebration for 130 families in Los Angeles County. On that day, the Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court in Los Angeles County opened its doors to hold adoption completion hearings for 130 children who had initially entered the child protection system as victims of child abuse and/or neglect. No one could have predicted on that day that Adoption Saturday would grow into a national program benefiting thousands of children throughout the United States.

Adoption Saturday was the most visible part of a project that began in Los Angeles in 1998 to process the adoptions of children freed in the dependency system in a more expeditious manner. It was part of a unique collaboration between the Los Angeles Juvenile Court, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and the volunteer legal community that was recruited, organized, and trained by two wonderful legal organizations, the Alliance for Children's Rights and Public Counsel Law Center. Many of the volunteer attorneys came from some of the larger and more prestigious law firms in Los Angeles. Indeed, Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher alone has handled over 2,000 adoptions since 1998.

Since 1998, Los Angeles has completed almost 19,000 adoptions from its foster care system. Over 7,000 adoptions have been completed on 23 Saturdays. Adoption Saturdays have ranged from 130 adoptions on the first one to more than 600 on November 18, 2000.

One of the noteworthy aspects of Adoption Saturday is that all the judicial officers who sit are volunteers from all over the court system. In Los Angeles, over 200 judicial officers have actually served on Adoption Saturday, with many volunteers being turned away. The most notable volunteers have included Chief Justice Ronald M. George, who assigned himself to the Superior Court of Los Angeles County in 1999 (a photograph of the chief justice with some of the children adopted that morning follows), and Judge Leonard Edwards of Santa Clara, who volunteered during his term as president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Needless to say, other jurisdictions throughout California and the United States have joined the celebration. November 2005 saw more than 200 communities in 45 states open their doors for the completion of 3,400 adoptions on the sixth annual National Adoption Day.

Why is Adoption Saturday so popular? The reasons are obvious. Children and families are receiving more immediate attention so that they can move on with their lives. Attorneys in the legal community are given the opportunity to donate their time and energy to a joyful cause for children on a day when they are less busy. The court and Children's Services are able to more expeditiously complete a process that lowers their caseloads. The community's confidence level toward the court, the child welfare system, and the legal community grows with the knowledge that so many people are positively affected by their efforts. National and local interest in adoption of foster children has grown with the program.

Last but not least, who can think of a happier way to spend a Saturday!





Connect for Kids

Great Idea, Great Results

Published: November 15, 2004

by: Cecilia Garcia

Judge Michael Nash

For several years now, one Saturday in November has been designated National Adoption Day. On that day, court personnel, social workers and attorneys open up courthouses nationwide for just one purpose: finalizing adoptions for thousands of children.

It started small, with one jurisdiction taking a hard look at the number of children waiting for final processing of their adoptions. In 1997, Los Angeles County undertook an evaluation to determine the size of the backlog of children who had been freed for adoption by the dependency courts, but whose final paperwork had not been processed by the overburdened court system. It turned out that the backlog amounted to about 6,000 cases.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Michael Nash says the backlog was caused by a number of factors which amounted, in his view, to “institutional neglect.”

ConnectforKids: *Can you talk about how Adoption Saturday started?*

Nash: We sought to develop a private/public partnership that would help us with this issue (of backlogged adoptions). Specifically we aligned ourselves with two advocacy groups, the Public Council Law Center and the Alliance for Children’s Rights, here in Los Angeles. Those groups agreed to recruit, organize and train attorneys from throughout the city to handle these cases of children waiting to have their adoptions completed and they were going to do it on a pro bono basis.

ConnectforKids: *Were the 6,000 children in some phase of the adoption process?*

Nash: They had all been freed for adoption through the dependency courts and were in an adoptive plan in varying stages of the completion process. So the Alliance and Public Council agreed to provide the attorneys. Our court agreed to provide

unlimited court access to handle these cases, and the department agreed to provide additional resources as well for their staff.

As we were beginning this process, a pro bono attorney by the name of Steve Meiers, with the law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, which had agreed to handle the pro bono cases, approached me with the thought that perhaps we could create some sort of an assembly line process here. One where the attorneys would meet with their clients on a Saturday, handle paperwork and then march them over to the courthouse to complete the adoptions. It was interesting idea, but obviously, to do all that in one day would not work.

So I suggested, perhaps, you folks could do your own paperwork day on a Saturday, and then on a future Saturday we can try opening our courts and see how that works.

In April 1998, Judge Nash and his colleagues conducted their first Adoption Saturday. They opened up five of the 24 available courts and processed 130 adoptions. Everyone, from the judges to the children and families, had, in Judge Nash's word, "a blast."

Nash: ..It really went well. Also, the department found out that because of the media coverage, there were more people calling to inquire about adoptions. So all around it was really a good thing and with all of that, at least for one day, it shined a positive spotlight on the foster care system, which as you probably know doesn't always get a positive spotlight or focus from the media or the community as a whole.

So after that we said, "Well, let's do it again." And we've done this two or three times a year since April of 1998. We've done as many as 600, around 650 in one day to as few as somewhere 200 in a day since then. And over that period of time, here in Los Angeles, we have completed pretty close to 7,000 adoptions, just on Saturdays alone.

ConnectforKids: *So it went from being an idea that began in Los Angeles County and now it's national. How did that happen?*

Nash: I started talking about it to my colleagues around the state and a few thought it would be a good idea and tried it. And then also I began talking about it with my colleagues involved with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and was asked to do several presentations at National Council events across the country. And courts sort of started to jump on the bandwagon, if you will.

At the same time, the Alliance for Children's Rights here in Los Angeles began an active program to recruit courts around the country and work with organizations to help spread the idea. And so, through the confluence of all those efforts, we now see... hundreds of courts participating in or doing Adoption Saturdays, most of them doing at least one in November as part of National Adoption Saturday. And the reason that it has spread like wildfire is that everybody's experience is the same as Los Angeles'...It's a tremendous experience for the judicial officers who volunteer, the attorneys who work with the families, the families. And of course the system, as I say, gets this positive spotlight that it doesn't normally get. It's a "can't lose" proposition.

In 2003, 38 states and the District of Columbia participated, with more than 120 jurisdictions completing the adoptions of 3,100 children. National Adoption Day is Saturday, November 20th.

National Adoption Day Resources

- [Alliance for Children's Rights](#)
- [National Adoption Day](#)
- [Public Council Law](#)

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Home at last

22 children's permanent placement with families is cemented at adoption ceremony

By Paula Sheil

Record Staff Writer

Published Sunday, November 21, 2004

STOCKTON -- Sleeping babes, toddlers by the hand, and boys and girls in their party best filled the courtroom of Judge Robin Appel on Saturday morning at the San Joaquin County Courthouse. Their happy adoptive parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and former foster parents joined them to celebrate the permanent placement of these already loved children.

Wade and Jeannie Wisegarver of Venture made the long trip with their daughter, Erica, 13, to participate in the sixth annual Adoption Saturday for 22 children ranging in age from infant to 11.

Infants have always enjoyed the highest rate of successful adoptions, but more parents are recognizing the need for siblings and children with special needs to find homes.

The Wisegarvers adopted siblings -- ages 3, 5 and 6 -- who already endured four foster homes and two shelter placements. Their only-child family became an instant kindergarten.

"We wanted young children, and you have to widen your scope," said Jeannie Wisegarver. "We decided to open up to the numbers."

Throughout November, hundreds of communities across California are holding similar events in honor of Adoption Awareness Month.

In 2003-04, the San Joaquin County Human Services Agency averaged 982 children in foster care. Only 150 children were adopted, said Dave Erb, deputy director of the San Joaquin County Human Services Agency.

More than 90 percent of the adoptions in California are done through the foster care system, according to Aspira, a nonprofit foster care and adoption agency in Stockton.

Judge Appel acknowledged the crowd with thanks and applauded the many parents who also served as foster placements for anywhere from a few months to several years. She drew knowing laughs from the audience when she said that now, "It's forever and ever, no matter how good or bad the kids are."

While each family was taken to the judge's podium and parents given corsages and boutonnieres, social workers piled tables with crayons, puzzles and Legos to keep the others children busy. Balloons bopped on strings tied to teddy bears, and outside the courtroom, a table laden with cookies and punch lent a birthday flair. Then a young mother rushed past.

"I have to change an exploding diaper," she said.

In a calmer mood, Edward and Virginia Luna of Stockton filled two rows with 22 family members to celebrate their permanent bond with Mariah. They had nearly finished the child-raising business with seven children ages 9 to 26. But caring for eight grandchildren made it easy for them to add the 20-month-old, brown-haired beauty.

She twirled in her pink skirt covered in black lace but never spun far from her father's knee.

"We are grateful his grandmother let us know it's a congenital disease that runs in her side of the family," he said.

In an overflow courtroom, Stefanie Martinez cradled an armload of day lilies for one of three social workers who helped her to adopt relatives Christofer, 6, and Cierra, 5. She and husband Steven have three children of their own and another foster son, who is 12.

"I think we'll keep doing it," Stefanie Martinez said. "We'll expand the house. I don't know what I'd do without the chaos. I think we just thrive on all the noise."

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<http://online.recordnet.com/articlelink/112104/news/articles/112104-gn-7.php#>

SATURDAY 11/19/05
NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY
Welcome to Alameda County's 6th Annual Adoption Day!

Please read the following information about our Adoption Day.

Information is available at the Family Check-In and Information Counter.

Please don't hesitate to ask anyone wearing a "Volunteer Staff" nametag for assistance.

The activities for the day are being held on the **3rd floor**, in the Jury Assembly Room. The actual Adoption Finalization Hearings with Judges and the filing of documents following the Hearing will occur on the **4th floor, in Departments 104, 105, 106, and 107**. We will be escorting families and guests around the Courthouse, for security purposes.

- **FAMILY CHECK-IN**

- II **Families, please make sure to officially check-in at the counter in the Jury Assembly Room on the 3rd floor at least ½ hour before your scheduled Finalization.** Each family will receive a packet of information and gifts at that time. (NOTE: if your appointment is at 10 a.m.. or 10:15, you have been asked to check in early so as to not conflict with the Opening Remarks, which begin at 9:15 a.m.. All other families should please check in before or after the Opening Remarks)
- II **Families, please meet at the elevators on the 3rd floor, 15 minutes prior to your scheduled Finalization.** At that time, you will be escorted to the 4th floor Courtrooms.

- **ADOPTION DAY ACTIVITIES**

- The day begin with Opening Remarks at 9:15 a.m.. Please refer to your Program for names of speakers and presentations being made.
- Following the morning Presentations, Brunch will be served, and will be available all day.
- There are 4 rooms off the main Jury Assembly Room. They include:
 - An Art Activities Room with activities led by volunteer artists from MOCHA (The Museum of Children's Art)
 - An Adoption Library Room, with displays of adoption related literature for children and books for adoptive parents. Stories will be read to children throughout the day beginning at 10:15
 - A Video Room where you can learn about plans for The Bay Area Heart Gallery and view a segment about Heart Galleries from across the country
 - A Family Photography Room, where volunteer photographers will be taking pictures of families and printing them out for families to take with them today.

- **ADOPTION FINALIZATION HEARINGS**

- II 15 minutes prior to scheduled Finalizations, families and their guests will be escorted from the 3rd floor to the 4th floor of the Courthouse.
- II On the 4th floor, families will be directed to the Courtroom where their Finalization Hearing is scheduled.
- II A Court Clerk will review paperwork with families that have been filed with the Court by Alameda County Adoptions. The clerk will Swear-In the family, and direct them to the Judge's Chambers for their Hearing. The Finalization Hearing takes approximately 15 minutes. Documents will be signed with the Judge, and the Judge will sign the Order of Adoption. Families and guests are free to take photographs or film in Chambers.
- II Following the Hearing, family will be directed to the Court Clerk where they will file their documents, and sign additional documents. Certified copies of your Adoption Decree may be obtained at that time. After the filing of documents, families and guests may return to the 3rd floor and participate in the activities, or are free to leave.

- **MEDIA COVERAGE**

We expect local and national media to be present at the event throughout the day. Media Representatives should not be contacting you for photographs, filming, comments or information without your consent or agreement.

CONGRATULATIONS AND BEST WISHES!

